

Reverberance
A Poetic Rhapsody

PROLOGUE

(Enter, talking to myself and apostrophizing the spirits of poets)

*What can I say to plead my case?
How can I argue for reviving the rhapsode
in these fragmented and confused times?
Who will care to support the growth of a worldwide
community of performers of classic poetry
when pressing political and social issues trouble the world,
when contemporary sensibilities argue
to condemn the classics to obsolescence,
when the classic canon is being vigorously challenged
and virtually disappearing from curricula?
How can I possibly hope to move an academic audience
with 21st century sensibilities
on the contemporary relevance of performing poems
no more recent than ninety years ago?
Is this even valid research,
this vision to launch a movement where enthusiastic,
willing lovers of poetry and of performing
band together to popularize the voicing of classic poetry
by flooding the world with the sounds of verse?
Am I behind the times,
a fossilized remnant of a bygone era,
where schoolmasters demanded children
recite Longfellow from memory?
Has the recitation of classic poetry gone the way of the dinosaur?
Homer, Spenser, Shakespeare,
Donne, Milton, Pope,
Blake, Burns, Wordsworth,
Coleridge, Shelley, Byron,
Keats, Tennyson, Whitman, Dickinson –
do any of you even care?
Or do you feel you will live on in the written word
without the need for living voices
to sound your verbal music?*

(Looking out, recognizing, acknowledging the audience)

Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned
the earth much?
Have you practiced so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin

of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun.... there are
millions of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand.... nor
look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres
in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

*Those are the words of Walt Whitman.
Today, right now, for you, I am his mouthpiece.
For the next 40 minutes I will be the mouthpiece for classic poets of the English language
As I fill the role taken by the rhapsode Ion,
Of whom Plato casts in a dialogue with his teacher, Socrates.
Socrates tells Ion:*

I often envy the profession of a rhapsode, Ion;
for you have always to wear fine clothes,
and to look as beautiful as you can is a part of your art.
Then, again, you are obliged to be continually
in the company of many good poets;
and especially of Homer,
who is the best and most divine of them;
and to understand him,
and not merely learn his words by rote,
is a thing greatly to be envied.
And no man can be a rhapsode
who does not understand the meaning of the poet.
For the rhapsode ought to interpret
the mind of the poet to his hearers,
but how can he interpret him well
unless he knows what he means?
All this is greatly to be envied.

*The rhapsodes of ancient Greece, like Ion,
performed the classic poetry of their time and place –
the most exalted being the works of Homer.
Rhapsodes of old were “song-stitchers”- that’s one translation of the word –
who selected, arranged, and commented upon
passages of their society’s great poets.
They performed memorized written texts.*

*Contemporary rhapsodes, as I see them,
perform the classic poetry of their language and culture,
the best poetry that embodies the civilization
to which the rhapsode and his audience belongs.*

*I am a rhapsode.
I perform classic poems of the English language.
I serve the poetry, the poets, and the audience.
I come before you today to rhapsodize,
to tell you of rhapsodes,
to revive the role of the rhapsode in contemporary society,
to model and inspire rhapsodes
to perform live, on audio, on video,
in any way they can to popularize
the performance of classic poetry.*

*And before I'm finished,
I hope to inspire you to answer my call to rhapsodize,
so that the sound of the human voice
speaking the verses of classic poetry
will reverberate around the world.*

*Welcome to:
Reverberance: A Poetic Rhapsody.*

Why “reverberance”? Listen to this lyric by Lord Tennyson for the answer:

The splendor falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story;
The long light shakes across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O, hark, O, hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O, sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying,
Blow, bugles; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O love, they die in yon rich sky,
They faint on hill or field or river;
Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
And grow forever and forever.
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.

“Our echoes roll from soul to soul,

And grow forever and forever.”

This is how I want rhapsodes to flourish – by reverberation

You’ve heard of:

*A pride of lions
A gaggle of geese
A pounce of cats
A obstinacy of buffalo
A troubling of goldfish
A flamboyance of flamingos
A pandemonium of parrots
An ostentation of peacocks
A parliament of owls
An exaltation of larks
A murmuration of starlings*

And now,

A REVERBERANCE of rhapsodes...

Imagine:

*Reverberances of rhapsodes in theatres, schools, community centers,
libraries, concert halls, stadiums, town squares, street corners, fairs, clubhouses,
giving away performances for free,
only for the public good.
Introducing the classic poems to first time audiences.*

*What would have been a passage from Homer that Ion might have performed? Certainly,
excerpts from his two great epics, Iliad and Odyssey, but as a “warm-up” at festivals like
the Panatheneia, he most likely would have voiced one of Homer’s hymns to the gods:*

*I shall sing of the revered Aphrodite,
the golden-crowned, the beautiful,
who hath for her portion the mountain crests of sea-girt Cyprus.
There the strength of the west wind
moistly blowing carried her amid soft foam
over the wave of the resounding sea.
The golden-ringed Hours
did gladly welcome her,
and clad her about in immortal raiment,
and on her deathless head set a well-wrought crown,
fair and golden,
and in her ears put earrings of orichalcum and of precious gold.*

Her delicate neck and white bosom
they adorned with chains of gold,
wherewith are bedecked the golden-ringed Hours themselves,
when they come to the glad dance
of the Gods in the dwelling of the Father.
Anon when they had thus adorned her in all goodliness
they led her to the Immortals,
who gave her greeting when they beheld her,
and welcomed her with their hands;
and each God prayed that he might lead her home
to be his wedded wife,
so much they marvelled at the beauty of the fair-garlanded Cytherean.
Hail, you of the glancing eyes,
you sweet winsome Goddess,
and grant that I bear off the victory in this contest,
and lend grace to my song,
while I shall remember you.

The other most popular poet to rhapsodize was Hesiod. Here is the opening to Theogony, Hesiod's account of the birth of the gods. It appropriately enough begins with an account of the Muses, who inspire poets as poets inspire rhapsodes:

Of the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing,
who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon,
and dance on soft feet about the deep-blue spring
and the altar of the almighty son of Cronos,
and, when they have washed their tender bodies,
they make their fair, lovely dances upon highest Helicon
and move with vigorous feet.
From there, they arise and go abroad by night,
veiled in thick mist,
and utter their song with lovely voice,
praising Zeus the aegis-bearer
and queenly Hera of Argos
who walks on golden sandals
and the daughter of Zeus the aegis-bearer – bright-eyed Athene,
and Phoebus Apollo, and Artemis who delights in arrows,
and Poseidon the earth-bearer who shakes the earth,
and quick-glancing Aphrodite,
and the holy race of all the other deathless ones that are for ever.
And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song
while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon,
and this word first the goddesses said to me –
the Muses of Olympus,
daughters of Zeus who bears the aegis:

“Shepherds of the wilderness,
wretched things of shame, mere bellies,
we know how to speak many false things
as though they were true;
but we know, when we will,
to utter true things.”

So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus,
and they plucked and gave me a rod,
a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvellous thing,
and breathed into me a divine voice
to celebrate things that shall be
and things there were in the past;
and they bade me sing
of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally,
but ever to sing of themselves both first and last.

*The rhapsodes of ancient Greece performed passages
from the poems of Homer from memory.
In this day, memorizing long passages of texts of any kind
is not as common as in days of old.
Actors memorize the lines of their part,
but you would be hard pressed to find people who memorize poems,
building a repertory of them to perform in public.
There are memory competitions
but those don't usually employ the memorizing and recital of poems.*

*Sybil Thorndike, the great dame of the English stage,
was said to have memorized a poem every day before breakfast,
“to keep her memory” in trim, as she put it.
I always thought that these must have been
very short poems or very late breakfasts.
But in April last year, I undertook a month-long project
to see if I could somewhat recreate Dame Sybil's practice.
As it was Shakespeare's birth month,
I chose mostly his sonnets and some speeches from his plays –
ones about the size of the fourteen-lined sonnets.
Because Shakespeare would almost without question
be the Homer of the English language, wouldn't he?
Homer composed epics and hymns,
Shakespeare composed plays, dramatic poems, and sonnets.
Playwright and poet, he is ideal material for the rhapsode.*

Here is his prologue to Act IV of Henry V, spoken by chorus:

Now entertain conjecture of a time
When creeping murmur and the poring dark
Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch:
Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
Each battle sees the other's umber'd face;
Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs
Piercing the night's dull ear, and from the tents
The armourers, accomplishing the knights,
With busy hammers closing rivets up,
Give dreadful note of preparation:
The country cocks do crow, the clocks do toll,
And the third hour of drowsy morning name.
Proud of their numbers and secure in soul,
The confident and over-lusty French
Do the low-rated English play at dice
And chide the cripple tardy-gaited night
Who, like a foul and ugly witch, doth limp
So tediously away. The poor condemned English,
Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires
Sit patiently and inly ruminate
The morning's danger, and their gesture sad
Investing lank-lean cheeks and war-worn coats
Presenteth them unto the gazing moon
So many horrid ghosts. O now, who will behold
The royal captain of this ruin'd band
Walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent,
Let him cry 'Praise and glory on his head!'
For forth he goes and visits all his host.
Bids them good morrow with a modest smile
And calls them brothers, friends and countrymen.
Upon his royal face there is no note
How dread an army hath enrounded him;
Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour
Unto the weary and all-watched night,
But freshly looks and over-bears attaint
With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;
That every wretch, pining and pale before,
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks:
A largess universal like the sun
His liberal eye doth give to every one,
Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all,
Behold, as may unworthiness define,

A little touch of Harry in the night.

*I see the performance of poetry in three camps.
One is the poet reading his or her own poems
at a coffeehouse, bookstore, or library.
Usually, with some exceptions, these performances
take place behind a podium and employ a generic “poetry voice.”
Most poets are not skilled oral interpreters,
yet they are the authors of their works and by virtue of that alone,
they deserve to have their interpretation heard.
Yet they do not perform the “definitive” version of their poems,
Indeed, because if the poem is at all vibrant and destined to live for ages,
there will never be a definitive version.
A classic is a classic precisely because
it has the vigour to withstand, survive, weather, endure, and flourish in
the effects of numerous valid interpretations.*

*Another camp is slam poetry.
This hip-hop based, very urban, street sounding style
of performing original poetry has gained prominence
in the world of performance poetry.
Indeed, it has brought validity to the practice
of actually **performing** poetry, not just reading it aloud.*

*And the third camp,
the one that I would like to see flourish alongside the others,
is that of the rhapsode performing classic poetry,
keeping alive in silvery speech the great poems
of the rhapsode’s language and culture,
to let them serve as inspiration
to modern poets and audiences of poetry.*

*The epics of Homer were composed orally.
Poetry composed on the page
is a bizarre, highly artificial linguistic form
that straddles both worlds.
It is an artificial literary arrangement of words
that is designed to be,
that cries out to be,
spoken aloud,
“Sung,” as it were,
through the rhythm and the tone
with the calls and the echoes
in the lines and the stanzas,
of the words and the phrases,*

of the vowels and the consonants.

*Why do I keep harping on classic poetry?
Those dusty old verses –
filled with archaic terms,
full of thees and thous and betimes and eres –
archaic inverted syntax,
with fixed patterns of stresses,
conventional patterns of rhyming,
old chestnuts that were thrust upon us in English literature classes
because they were “good” for us?
All so very far removed from the rhythm and flow of everyday speech.*

*Why should we voice these archaic, difficult artifacts of language?
Are they not best left silent or even left alone to fade into obscurity?
Left to “die in yon rich sky, to faint on hill or field or river”*

*What about new poetry, original poetry,
poetry written for today’s ear by today’s poets?
There is certainly always a place for new poetry.
Poetry which plays further with language,
that stretches the structures and conventions of language.
But to do that, at least to do so well,
we must be aware, vividly aware,
of the treasury of language we have inherited.
The would-be poets who claim not to read but only to write poetry
cannot to be taken seriously.*

*I advocate rhapsodizing classic poetry
Because we need to be the caretakers and the stewards
of our linguistic heritage
that we may embody it for our contemporary companions
and pass it to our descendents.*

*For it to flourish in our culture
And nourish our existence,
Classic poetry needs rhapsodes to reverberate its wise music
and venues for those rhapsodes to rhapsodize rhapsodies –
Live in theatres, libraries, community centers, parks, open fields.
Archived in Audio and video media and the internet.*

*Poetry, classic poetry especially,
preserves the rhythms echoed to us from our ancestors,
ancestors who lived to pass to us
the best record of their experience of the human condition.*

*Right now, as the character Cinque in the film 1997 Amistad said,
we are the very reason our ancestors lived.
And our classic poets are no longer here to voice their own poems.
That is why rhapsodes must sound those poems for them –
Must carry those poems in our memories –
To remember them by memorizing and memorializing those poems for them
and for us, their descendants.*

*I had been quick study when I was younger, much younger,
and I have read with hope the new findings on neuro-plasticity –
the brain that can remake itself even past middle age.
I find that I still have long passages from Shakespeare verbatim – or nearly so –
which I had memorized in my twenties.
Training as an actor and performing in dozens of plays helps,
as does viewing the memory more as a muscle than a container.
Memorizing is hard work, requiring lots of concentration, imagination, and rehearsal.*

*I love to memorize classic poetry because it is worth memorizing –
in a way like sacred scripture, of which there is a long-standing tradition –
because its alliteration, assonance, meter, and rhyme help my memory,
and also because I can entertain myself
and others with reciting it at any time.
It is extremely portable.*

*Why else do I choose to performing poetry?
One other reason –
I suppose one of the same reasons that I and others act –
is that it allows me a chance to express emotions
I cannot express in everyday life,
passions far too private to share explicitly,
but which can be channeled into the subjects of the poems,
allowing me to express the feelings
without revealing the details of my personal life.*

*Focusing on emotions
(recollected in tranquillity, as Wordsworth wrote),
is the heart of the poetry of the Romantics,
as you can hear in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's
Kubla Khan, or A Vision in a Dream.
Exotic, mysterious and frightening,
It tells a fragmented tale
of a poet's frenzied struggle
with his own imagination:*

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:*

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me

That with music loud and long
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

*I have been performing classic poetry now for over forty years
and whenever I doubt the value of these performances
I have only to remember the times people have said
after hearing me perform that very poem,
“Oh! Now I understand it!”*

*It's not to say that my interpretation is definitive.
By no means!
But I do have my interpretation, as every rhapsode should.
And an interpretation a rhapsode can perform
with strong commitment can make
a most deeply moving impression on an audience.
And isn't that what it's all about?*

*Sometime in high school, at least by junior year,
I acquired my first anthology of poetry,
Oscar Williams' Immortal Poems of the English Language,
with great poetry arranged chronologically
from the anonymous poets to Dylan Thomas.
At that time I also fell in love
with a recording of Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," performed by Sir Lewis Casson,
husband of Dame Sybil Thorndike,
who also appeared on the record.
And even though Tennyson's Ulysses
bears little resemblance to the Odysseus of Homer,
his stirring message is one worth reverberating again and again.
Here Ulysses, after returning home to Ithaca
and living there for three years,
rouses his men to take to the Aegean sea once more in search of adventure.*

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me —
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed

Free hearts, free foreheads — you and I are old;
 Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
 Death closes all: but something ere the end,
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
 The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
 The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
 Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
 Push off, and sitting well in order smite
 The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
 Of all the western stars, until I die.
 It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
 It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
 And see the great Achilles, whom we knew

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

So what poets would the modern day English language rhapsode perform?

The great, classic poets from the early part of the 20th century and before, such as those you have just heard — mostly men, alas — all those dead, white men so problematic to so many. Homer, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Whitman, Dickinson — and many others, obscure or anonymous. The wealth of our poetic legacy is too vast for any one rhapsode. For the role of the rhapsode to be revived in these times — to truly be acknowledged as an aesthetic and social force for good — will take hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, to perform and hear these poems.

*So, what does a rhapsode study?
 The catalog of classic poets, their poetry, their lives.*

The catalog of poetic devices: metaphor, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, meter, onomatopoeia ...

The catalog of poetic forms: the sonnet, villanelle, pantoum, pastoral, limerick, cento, ...

The human speaking voice: breath, resonance, articulation, and all the musicality the voice can achieve through tempo, rhythm, melody, and dynamics

Acting, the infinite variety of human behavior, the art of impersonation, the practice of first imagining and then embodying a fictive world – a world suggested by the poet.

And above all, LIFE.

In all its variety, in all its vicissitudes.

*Only then can the rhapsode,
the exalted interpreter of the abstract symbols
lying silent and dormant on paper or reflected on screens,
only then can the rhapsode
bring these symbols to life for a listening audience.*

*If the arts and humanities,
and poetry, the highest form of language,
show us what it means to be human,
consider this imaginary dialogue
penned by Leigh Hunt
between a human and a fish:*

To a Fish

You strange, astonished-looking, angle-faced,
Dreary-mouthed, gaping wretches of the sea,
Gulping salt-water everlastingly,
Cold-blooded, though with red your blood be graced,
And mute, though dwellers in the roaring waste;
And you, all shapes beside, that fishy be,--
Some round, some flat, some long, all devilry,
Legless, unloving, infamously chaste:--

O scaly, slippery, wet, swift, staring wights,
What is't ye do? What life lead? eh, dull goggles?
How do ye vary your vile days and nights?
How pass your Sundays? Are ye still but joggles
In ceaseless wash? Still nought but gapes, and bites,
And drinks, and stares, diversified with boggles?

A Fish Answers

Amazing monster! that, for aught I know,
With the first sight of thee didst make our race
For ever stare! O flat and shocking face,
Grimly divided from the breast below!
Thou that on dry land horribly dost go
With a split body and most ridiculous pace,
Prong after prong, disgracer of all grace,
Long-useless-finned, haired, upright, unwet, slow!

O breather of unbreathable, sword-sharp air,
How canst exist? How bear thyself, thou dry
And dreary sloth? What particle canst share
Of the only blessed life, the watery?
I sometimes see of ye an actual pair
Go by! linked fin by fin! most odiously.

*Inevitably, when I rhapsodize, I am asked,
“Do you write your own poems?”
It’s a fair question.
People first think of writing rather than
performing when thinking of poetry.
I answer that I prefer to perform
the sublime poems of others than pen my own.
I’m much better at the former than the latter.
I do, however, like to create derivative forms
like found poetry and the cento.
In fact, both of these are great group community activities
and ways to discover and encourage rhapsodes.
So, if any of you here today in the audience
care to rhapsodize for a moment or two,
I invite you to join me in creating and performing a cento,
which is a poem comprised of lines from other poems.
We’ll take a selection of lines from the poems
I have just performed and will perform later,
put them into this bag, shake them up,
distribute them randomly to you volunteers
and then perform them. OK?
By the way, this specific technique of composing a cento
comes from the poem by Tristan Tzara entitled
“To Make a Dadaist Poem”
but instead of using a newspaper article
and cutting it into single words,
we will use poems and cut them into lines.
I’m sure it’s a much more random method
than others have taken in composing their centos.
But now is the time to create community,
foster creativity, encourage performance,
and, of course, have some fun.*

*(All this takes place as I am telling this. Slips of paper are distributed and willing
volunteers read their lines in a random order cued by my pointing to them. One to three
variations, depending on size of volunteer group and receptiveness of the audience.)*

*So, as you see,
there are more ways to love and serve poetry than through writing it.
There will always be a place for great new poems,
but rhapsodes fill the air
with the sounds of great, classic poetry from the past –
echoes that reverberate in the present and enrich the future.
Classic poetry is woven into the fabric of the culture
and needs to be heard, not only read silently.
Poets in training need to hear it,
and so does the general public.*

*What lover of English language poetry
has not memorized poems of Robert Frost?
I did it in my junior year of college, I remember –
the ones you'd expect:
The Road Not Taken,
 Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,
 Fire and Ice.
I read on the Poetry Out Loud website –
do you all know about Poetry Out Loud?
It's a program sponsoring poetry recital contests
the National Endowment for the Arts started in public high schools in 2005.
The grand prize winner in the final competition in Washington, D.C.
wins the prize of \$20,000.
Anyway, I read on their website that Frost's "Fire and Ice"
was the most popular poem performed.
I wonder why? Can you guess? I'll bet you can.
I do think that rhapsodes and audiences
benefit from performances of Frost's poetry,
and I will share one lesser known poem of his:*

HYLA BROOK

By June our brook's run out of song and speed.
Sought for much after that, it will be found
Either to have gone groping underground
(And taken with it all the Hyla breed
That shouted in the mist a month ago,
Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)--
Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
Even against the way its waters went.
Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat--
A brook to none but who remember long.

This as it will be seen is other far
Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.

*There is a controversy about how to reverberate the sounds of poetry –
should one perform or simply read it?
Should one “act” the poem or merely read it “flat”?
Firstly, any way that someone chooses to usher into speech
a classic poem waiting in silent pages
of closed books on library shelves
is better than letting it remain silent.
But what is a “flat” reading?
Is there really such a thing?
Proponents of that style of delivery
say that it keeps the listener’s attention on the words
rather than the speaker.
But aren’t they describing an oral reading
that employs **restraint**, rather than one that is “flat”?
How can one read aloud in a flat style
and still hold an audience’s attention?*

*Do I mean to imply that rhapsodes
should adopt the bluster of the ham actor
and blow through verses with stentorian bombast?
Certainly not.
We should not have to endure that even in the theatre,
much less from the rhapsode.
But I do say that poetry is enhanced by dramatic performance,
by the rhapsode impersonating the speaker of the poem,
reliving the story of the poem,
seeing the pictures painted by the poem vividly in his mind
and speaking the words that capture those images
in a rhythm and inflection
that allows the audience to see them as well.*

*And yet, there are many valid ways to interpret a poem aloud, whether one refers to that
interpretation as a “flat” reading or a dramatic performance. Perhaps not all
interpretations are valid, and some are more contestable than others, but a classic can
certainly withstand the stretching it can take from multiple interpretations. There is no
definitive interpretation, only preferred ones.*

*Let’s have some more fun with an old chestnut of a poem,
one with a well-worn history as a school assignment
and ripe material for demonstrating
the more over-the-top, flamboyant style
popular in the heyday of elocution,*

*when poems were boldly and histrionically “ACTED”!!!!
There’s still a lot to learn from passionate and bold ACTING!!*

*The poem is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Excelsior,”
which means “onward and upward.”
That title is also the one-word refrain of each stanza of this poem.
So, for those of you shy would-be rhapsodes
who could not muster up the courage to volunteer for the cento,
here’s your chance to start your rhapsodic careers.
We’ll need to rehearse a little,
because the refrain is delivered in a different tone each time.
First, a nice, loud, stentorian one:*

(Audience: Excelsior!!)

And now a soft, pensive one:

(Audience: Excelsior...)

*So just listen to the context of the stanza to give you a clue how to perform the refrain,
OK? Ready?*

The shades of night were falling fast,
As through an Alpine village passed
A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice,
A banner with the strange device,

Audience: Excelsior!Excelsior!

His brow was sad; his eye beneath,
Flashed like a falchion from its sheath,
And like a silver clarion rung
The accents of that unknown tongue,

Audience: Excelsior!Excelsior!

In happy homes he saw the light
Of household fires gleam warm and bright;
Above, the spectral glaciers shone,
And from his lips escaped a groan,

Audience: Excelsior!Excelsior!

"Try not the Pass!" the old man said;
"Dark lowers the tempest overhead,

The roaring torrent is deep and wide!"
And loud that clarion voice replied,

Audience: Excelsior!

"Oh, stay," the maiden said, "and rest
Thy weary head upon this breast!"
A tear stood in his bright blue eye,
But still he answered, with a sigh,

Audience: Excelsior!

"Beware the pine-tree's withered branch!
Beware the awful avalanche!"
This was the peasant's last Good-night,
A voice replied, far up the height,

Audience: Excelsior!

At break of day, as heavenward
The pious monks of Saint Bernard
Uttered the oft-repeated prayer,
A voice cried through the startled air,

Audience: Excelsior!

A traveller, by the faithful hound,
Half-buried in the snow was found,
Still grasping in his hand of ice
That banner with the strange device,

Audience: Excelsior!

There, in the twilight cold and gray,
Lifeless, but beautiful, he lay,
And from the sky, serene and far,
A voice fell, like a falling star,

Audience: Excelsior!

Excellent! A marvelous performances by a new reverberance of rhapsodes!

*What more can I tell you to convince you that classic poetry needs to be sounded and that
the world needs rhapsodes –
hosts, circles, choruses, troupes, teams,
bands, flights, fleets, flocks, tribes, prides,*

exaltations, mumurations, reverberances of rhapsodes –

to keep that classic poetry alive in the hearts and minds of this and future generations?

*Poems tell stories,
 enact dramas,
 make arguments,
 paint pictures,
 evoke emotions,
 stimulate senses –
all the things that fiction, nonfiction, and drama can do –
and at least one other thing that only poetry must do.
More than any other form of literature,
poems make music with the language in which they are written.*

*Robert Frost famously asserted that poetry is what does not translate.
What he meant, I think, is that the music of the original (source) language
does not carry over into its translation into another language.
The translator can create a musicality in the target language,
but it is not the music of the source language.
And that music is the poetry, is the essence,
of what makes a poem a poem –
those exact combinations of sounds,
those consonants kissing those vowels.
And you can best hear that music when poems are performed,
and performed with a voice trained
to exploit/milk/relish/highlight/massage
to give the most value and weight to that music.*

*There are hundreds of thousands of treasures of classic poetry to sound,
And millions of people to inspire, entertain, and educate with them.
Find the ones you want to give voice to,
Find your audience, find your venue, find your fellow rhapsodes.
Join them and me.*

*Let's raise our rhapsodic voices
and reverberate the verbal music of classic poetry.
Let's rhapsodize!*